

Interview with Gary Hill and Kathy High
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Partially transcribed

02:48

Gary Hill: SO I was working at Artists' TV Lab in Woodstock at the time – you know it was People's Theater. And I just worked myself into a job. I just kind of learned the stuff. I ran into it happenstantially really. This is like 1973. And then because that whole NYSCA funding focus changed you know to art rather than to something else. And I was kind of an easy seed for them, I became the Artist TV Lab coordinator. You know I would help artists when they came to do things with the equipment they had there – which would be an Eric Seigel colorizer, and then otherwise I don't even know what there was. There was just a bunch of stuff that half worked, like a special effects generator – which created noise. [chuckles] So I was just playing around with all that stuff, rescanning and all that kind of thing.

And then either late 74 or 75, Walter Wright came and did a workshop with some of Dave's early stuff, some oscillators, and maybe a colorizer. And we just hit it off really well. And we had this dream thing of making a big old synthesizer. And Walter knows a lot of stuff, probably more than Dave who is more hands-on. Anyway, I made a frame for the potential of a synthesizer. And that's why I went to the Experimental Television Center to begin with – Walter had told me all about it. And that's when I saw all that stuff.. and then I came back and I kept doing things with Walter. We even did a cable show in the middle of the night, believe it or not, where we did live weird stuff, whatever we could think of. And then we did this mixed media thing which we sort of did at ETC, Synergism, which was also done at Anthology Film Archives, sort of dance, sculpture, synthesis and sound, all kinds of stuff you know. And that was like 75 76.

And then shortly after that we moved to Reinbeck. Because the Artists TV Lab went to get funding from Dutchess county instead of [whatever Woodstock's county was]. So I was living there with Barbara Buckner and Stephen Colpin (sp?), [and Ken Marsh], in this house and continued to do this stuff. And that thing just kind of fell apart, because Ken had a kind of middle class vision for himself. And it just didn't work for that kind of a situation. You know he wanted a big salary. And so we just rotated through unemployment a few days, and CETA came around. And I met George Quasha. And then I moved to Barrytown and started working for Open Studio. That was run by George Quasha and they also had this thing called the Arnold Piddy Art Center – a church like building. And they also had a restaurant. I mean he actually had like 40 CETA employees.

KH: Really! I had no idea.

GH: Something like \$7500 per year. ... Occasionally I would do some performance or demonstration, or record some poets coming in that sort of thing.

And then I still wanted to do the synthesizer thing. SO I kept bugging Dave, "come on Dave! I'll pay for a room, and buy parts and put you up and we'll just start doing it." Something like that. And he said okay, and came down. And we went to PD Surplus which was an electronics super super surplus. I remember buying a box of 1,000 chips, mostly logic chips and stuff like that. But there were 4k, literally 4k memory chips. Or maybe they were 16k. But anyways, when he first came, I bought a - he would remember the name of it - a "Solaris" or something like that, this computer kit. (God only knows where I got this money, I really can't even imagine how I got this money because I didn't have any.) So he built this computer and he was programming in assembly language and stuff.

9:24

KH: AND this was in the late 70s?

GH: This was probably 1976.

KH: Wow.

GH: It is really hard to say...

KH: I sounds right, ...because when I was talking with him about it all it seems the work with you was around 1976-78 somewhere around there from what I can figure.

GH: More or less. Maybe the very end of 76, beginning of 77. I don't know if he had moved down there yet. I remember he had made an A to D converter. And that was actually the first A to D converter made by anyone, including the Vasulkas. And I was using this ... we had an output amplifier and just a couple of boards and this thing. And we hadn't made what would become a 'bit switch' so you could switch, a matrix for bit switching. And actually I made that tape "Bathing" by actually soldering the bits and then taking the board out and re-soldering the bits and redoing that to see what the image was. You know (chuckles). I have done much more stupid things so it didn't bother me too much.

And also I have done welding, so I learned to do that kind of thing really quickly. So I did a lot of boards, you know the soldering. I did almost all the boards. And so when Dave left I reproduced several of he boards, like a keyer, I made three of them. And the frame buffer. I really learned a lot from him. I could do logic chips myself. And I made a bigger Frame Buffer so I could go in there myself and mess with the horizontal and vertical. And the comparator and ways to grab image interframe and things like that you know. Which was all that I learned just from talking to him.

Anyway, backing up for a second. When we were making these things, we got that A and D thing and this was one of the most memorable things. He probably already told you. But he was working on this frame buffer. And it was on this little card. And

he had just out of laziness stacked the memory chips and just soldered the legs. I think there were just 12 or 16 pins on each side. And he had a stack about like this. And I was gone that morning, and he had to go. And he you know he had successfully made it. And grabbed an image of himself Waving hi then he had to go. So it was in the studio when I came home. It was like a big event you know! [laughter]

So probably by the time he left we had that. And I had made a - and I just learned what was available and since I didn't have to do any analog, or know anything about resistors or all that stuff - well, except for maybe power and capacitors - I made this ALU thing, and another A to D converter and then just started messing with that. I made a few things. But then I wasn't really into that anymore. It was sort like once I had made all that stuff I realized that this is not me, you know.

And then at some point in 78... 13:00

Was given Rutt Etra from TV Lab when it was closing down 15:00

16:46

In 79 I went and taught at Buffalo ... that's actually where I made some works for me that were important that got me onto my own thing - they were made there: Essential Video, Round and About, Primarily Speaking, Sound Beams, Black White Text, War Zone (the installation). I guess it's because there is a lot of snow and you were inside a lot. And that's when I used a lot of the equipment we made. And then you know I had whatever we made. And I added onto it for a while. And I think Ave must have gotten back upstate, some where in the early 80s.

KH: He was in Owego by then.

GH: Then I did less and less. I wasn't really interested in that kind of image processing kind of thing. Once ... speak everything changed. [name of piece?]

18:00

The next time I called Dave... switcher with so many inputs and outputs... could be 8 by 24 updated every frame... 8x32 Between Send and A Hard Place. Full blown research. Cost me \$10,000. He continued to make them for me. And only for me because it was my idea, and such. And I did several with that. Really the opposite of layering on one screen, which would be multiplexing. And in this case it was de-multiplexing - taking one out into space. So that was kind of the basic notion.

And soon after that I did Tall Ships which he programmed... But let me back up a bit. Besides making hardware of course you had to have software to program it this switcher. (20:00) And we had a lot of back and forth and he was very responsive... I said can we do it so that... A lot of this made the process faster so he would keep up with what you wanted to do and all. Can it ping pong, can we have it wrap around, can we pick this input and this out, just a lot of this kind of thing just made it more you know quicker and more elegant really to use. And even later when I did these strobe pieces he just modified the software so I could use strobe lights. Pretty much.

Well it was derived from the same kernel I guess that would be the terminology. It was kind of interesting because I told him the basic idea, and he said okay here's what you have to do. I have the piece of paper too. (21:02) You have to define for me you know sort of like the if, the and's, the if and the when's and the then's – you now kind of like the logic of the thing as detailed as possible. All this kind of thing. SO I did that. I even decided to make it more complicated. But then in the end I really simplified it down to the way it is. 21:30 ...

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So we did that with a lot of back and forth on the software to get it to work right. And he seemed to like doing these things because it wouldn't be in existence...

KH: ... you pushed him...

GH: In that sense, probably the biggest leap and really in this case his input really changed the nature of the beasts - which was this piece called Dervish. Where it was more or less started as an extension of the switching pieces but with something like the idea of a turret or something that would be moving, that would be changed so quickly that you could put an image anywhere in a room every frame. So we worked on that for a while, you know, with drawings and going back and forth, and he said, this is just ...the motor is so powerful that it would take massive amounts of money and time and even then we don't really know what to do. So we really kind of folded the idea on itself by using a spin gear and an encoder so that the computer would know exactly where that gear was and the projectors would point into the mirror. And then instead of the projector bulb we replaced it with strobe lights. And so it could strobe at exact points. So that you know rather than randomly flying images – we could actually have an image just slide across the wall. But it was actually being strobed. So the idea came much more than just a structural thing for me, then I started thinking about okay then we want it this way, then it's got to be a kind of ritual thing – like an object that's terrifying in some way. And so I got really loud with the sound track and even the motor itself so it would start up when you came in and kind of go through this consciousness disembodiment. So that was a really big thing. And you know he had to come each time to build it. It was like floor to ceiling. 25:00... moving at 900 rpms

So then we did Withershins in 95. That one was pretty straight forward in the sense that if you go here then this is going to happen.

29:50

making video pieces and machinery what was it that was intriguing to you as opposed to welding a sculpture?

GH: it is really like kind of much messier. Like I would say that I am as a model of a brain, I would say Woody was a much more "We're going to make tools, and then we are going to go onto the next tool." For me, you know I am a street urchin in

Woodstock practically and making sculpture and barely alive. I am stealing food from the supermarket to live. I am selling jewelry, and then this place when I went and knocked on the door – I mean I didn't even know what video was. They showed me a 3400 video portapak. And I started recording with it – you know I started recording myself. And I asked them "Do you have another portapak?" And they said "Yeah." And then I started recording myself interacting with myself. Various things, you know I automatically loved it. "Oh feedback, this is interesting." And then just looking at nature and things through that electronic viewfinder. Maybe it was also that it was so instant, so present, so now. Whereas the sculpture that I made was very time consuming you know storage problems. But you know I liked to touch things and all that. Also around that time I started making sound with the sculptures. And I had gotten into electronic probably even before I went and saw Woodstock Video Lab. I had bought this synthie from a sort of up and coming French rock and roll star. His name was Johnny Labatt. Impressing guy. In fact in exchange for some time in Bearsville Studio I let him take one of my sculptures which I was already doing but to make sound from it to use on one of his albums. So if there is some sort of bridge, but still I would have to say it was just subconsciously. It was really the manipulation of sound because I had tape recorders that I was recording and making tape loops from the sculptures, and then processing them with this little synthie thing you know. I kept making sculpture but not for very long. First of all I had no background in art. (32:50) And in 1970 I was doing a private workshop with this teacher I had met at the Arts Students League where I went for 1 month in 1969. And he took me to this show. His name is Bruce Dorton, we're good friends now. He's a painter. He took me to this show called 1940-1970 Painting and Sculpture in NY at the Metropolitan. And I saw virtually any major person all at the same time. Meanwhile I was making these things really based on this friend of mine's older brother I met when I was 15 years old, making sculpture. I just really dug it. Enough that I saved my money at this job at the beach and I bought these tanks and I started welding seriously like 4 or 5 hours a day. And I thought I would learn what he did. And this was some sort of combination of Giacometti, Heronimus Bosch and some sort of psychedelic framing. And so then once I saw he show, within about a year, I went through every single school of everything – abstract, leaving it raw, then modular, then there was a room full of these things made with this material that I would make and put sound underneath. I mean it's kind of funny when you look at it backwards. So at that moment, that's right when I ran into video. So installation, sounds and then there it was you know.

KH: (34:55) ...

GH: I got so into it that I was exchanging Ken Marsh often I would record town board meetings and kind of boring things in exchange for just going into the Lab at night so I could use all of that stuff. And I swear to god, I wish I had taken some pictures, because at one point I had a camera on my belly, another on a tripod you know looking down on my face, so like when I went "[grunt sound]" I would move to see myself here – this kind of weird shit. These things were more where I am now

than this period of synthesizer stuff. Which was really in the end really learning about the stuff, but it really wasn't my conceptual place.

KH: 36:11 there's a really interesting line you said in George Quasha's and Steim's book about – something about Resolutions and reading the signal and in a way reading the signal .. lead you into linguistic inquiry, looking at the way the signal flowed and the process of it.

GH: 36:43 When you think of video you can think of it somewhat linguistically. The structure of it, or the very fact say in Resolutions the notion that that line there's a point at which theoretically it disappears because it is between lines. And that very notion is so video, so electronic, so video – it is not film. It can't be film. It has nothing to do with that whatsoever at all. You know most people make video as a cheap way of making film. There are not a lot of people making linguistic video. You know what I mean. It is really just simply picture making still. You know people passing the ball or something. The potential is still there. I mean obviously the potential has moved into a more liquid form of computer possibility and that really where's it's happen. And we are always stuck on images just use it in that way and others have moved on to a more interactive more fluid thing that computers offer. I mean it's weird when you think of like I have a piece that's two channels, right? It has two channels work that needs two projectors and two screens, right? But now it goes through a matrix box. So is it one channel or two? I mean it's like you see that it really doesn't matter. What matters is what the experience is. And it's amazing that – I have run into this before with conservators at the Pompidou - they showed Mesh and they wanted to show it with the original monitors – which were these things that I had borrowed with wood grain on the sides, they were actually televisions with monitor out and they were uglier than all hell, but it was what you could get you know. And I said “no, that's that piece. Here is the piece – it is a score. We're going to do the score the best we can. In fact, we're going to use a G5 and we're going to write a program in MAX MSP and use flat screen technology and the piece will be 10 times better than it was because it'll be closer to the concept, hello!” But you know this is like the clash that is going to go on for a long time until basically I think that aspect of the art world will die. I mean there's a big shift about to happen and it'll probably happen along with total financial annihilation the whole structure and then it'll rebuild itself and then that art world thing will not exist.

GH: (40:06) I mean Dave has even recently done stuff for me but it is recreating or making another one of so that I can show it somewhere like a switcher device. And I call him up now and I press him into this - kind of he can survive - this new analog modular world that's opened up all over the world, Eurorack and Surge, Fluflaw you know it's a big thing now and all this stuff. And he has just made this oscilloscope ...

KH: Yeah the oscilloscope and the MVPI

GH: And he's working on the video oscillator.

KH: ...He's been in full production. ..

GH: I've gotten hooked into this myself. I am making a wall of sound that can blow anything away. I am trying to make some music - with lyrics. But it'll be different from anything else...

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